

You Can't Get There From Here

By Steven A. Silverman

A mother leaves work 40 minutes early so she can get to her son's daycare center before it closes. A plumber adds a \$75 surcharge to any job in Montgomery County during rush hour. A parent in Bethesda, who takes her daughter to a specialist in Baltimore, leaves at 1 p.m. for a 4 o'clock appointment. A Silver Spring law firm won't hire paralegals living in Germantown because they won't stay.

Traffic congestion is destroying our quality of life and threatening our economy. A recent poll shows that 47 percent of Montgomery County residents think traffic congestion is a major problem; 29 percent think it has reached crisis proportions. Nearly half surveyed indicated that they were leaving work earlier or staying later than they did a few years ago to avoid traffic. Twenty-one percent of Montgomery County residents say they may consider leaving the area because of the traffic congestion problems. For the first time, local residents say traffic congestion ties with education as the most important concern our community faces.

It's not hard to see how we got into this mess. Most of the population and employment growth in the region has been in the suburbs, and people own more cars. Between 1975 and 2000, the population in Montgomery County grew by 43 percent, while the number of registered vehicles increased by 76 percent and the number of two-worker, two-commuter households grew.

Last year, Montgomery County counted for one-third of all the new jobs created in the state of Maryland. The Metro subway system, designed to bring workers from the suburbs into the city, made sense 30-years ago when two-thirds of Montgomery County residents worked in the District. But now two-thirds of those who live in Montgomery County work in the county too, putting more and more cars on local roads. New residential developments have sprung up in Howard, Frederick, and Prince George's Counties, bringing more people onto roads in Montgomery County.

What's the biggest single factor contributing to traffic congestion. While the region ranks first in the nation in carpooling and second in transit use – behind New York City – 71 percent of commuters still drive to work alone, a figure that hasn't changed in ten years.

Last year, the Montgomery County Council commissioned a survey of 1,000 local commuters who drive to work alone. Results show that about half of them will continue to drive alone no matter what – but the other half seems willing to consider alternative transportation. Eleven percent said they would ride buses if fares were lowered from \$1.10 to 50 cents or less. Sixteen percent would use alternative transportation if they received \$65-per-month transportation subsidies. Others would switch to public transportation or carpools if they had faster commutes, more convenient bus routes, and more adequate parking near Metro.

So, what's the answer? We must continue to focus on large roads and transit projects that can produce traffic congestion relief. But projects – including the ICC, the Silver Spring-Bethesda Trolley, the Purple Line, the I-270 Corridor Cities Transitway, and dedicated busways on Georgia Avenue and Route 29 – are years away. In the meantime, the state and county have been working on intersection improvements, new interchanges on Route 29 and I-270, an extension of Norbeck Road, new parking garages at Shady Grove and Grosvenor Metro, and a wider Route 28 in North Potomac.

Unfortunately, this isn't nearly enough. Here's what more we can – and must – do now.

- Provide incentives to get local government employees to stop driving to work alone. The federal government recently expanded its Metro-check program to all federal employees in the Washington region, giving employees \$65 per month toward Metro, carpools, or buses. As a result, Metro ridership rose by 13,500 riders in the first week alone. County and state governments should replicate this program.
- Beef up the Fare Share Program, which currently provides public and private monies to private sector commuters who get to work without driving alone. One company, The Calvert Group, buys employees sneakers if they walk to work. We should target this program to high-congestion areas such as Bethesda and Route 29.
- Cut bus fares. Montgomery County last year cut bus fares 44 percent on its Ride-On system for purchasers of two-week and 20-trip passes. That's a good step, but we need to go further. In high-traffic congestion corridors, we should make bus fares free.
- Build more parking garages near Metro sites to encourage use of Metro – and reduce the cost of parking at Metro sites.

- Speed commutes by expanding the number of buses and allowing express buses to move faster through traffic lights. Technology in Los Angeles has cut 25 percent off travel time by extending green lights as a bus approaches.
- Encourage companies to support telecommuting and offer flex-time options by leading the way with the County government workforce.
- Reexamine our economic development strategies. We should provide incentives for companies to locate in places like Germantown and Burtonsville, making it easier for people to work where they live.

Last year, School Superintendent Jerry Weast initiated a “Call to Action” to address critical school needs. We need a similar “Call to Action” to tackle our traffic congestion crisis. Will Rogers once said, “The only way to solve the traffic problems of the country is to pass a law that only paid-for cars are allowed to use the highways.” Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.

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